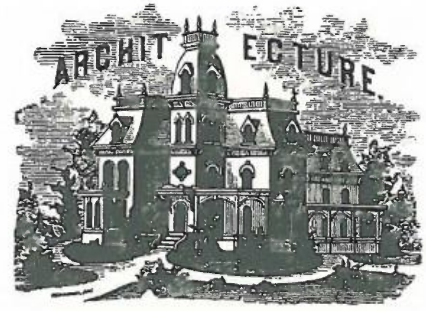


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## Bradbury Johnson 1766-1819

When the Rev. Timothy Dwight, President of Yale College and inveterate traveller, passed through Saco (then Pepperrellborough) in 1797, he found "little...which could be termed agreeable" in the sawmilling town. But when Dwight returned ten years later, the town was "almost entirely changed," and the focal point of the transformed village was "a new and beautiful church: a structure superior to any other...in this district and inferior to very few in New England."<sup>1</sup> The man responsible for the changed aspect of Saco was Bradbury Johnson (1766-1819), a builder-architect who left his mark in Maine and New Hampshire but whose name and work have been almost entirely forgotten.

Johnson's meeting house (Figure 1), hardly remembered since its destruction in a suspicious fire of 1860, was one of the "largest and most elegant" religious structures in Maine from the time of its completion in 1804. Begun in 1803 and finished at a cost of more than \$16,500, the Saco meeting house was an important early reflection of the Federal style in both plan and detailing. Its axial scheme, with the tower and entrance at one of the narrow ends of the building, reflected the recent adoption in New England of the English church plan as a substitute for the traditional layout of meeting houses like the one in Alna, Maine of 1789. The Saco building's tower, the arched doorway openings and attenuated pilasters of the facade, and the interior (Figure 2) reflected the new aesthetic of the Federal style which was pervading New England under the influence of English and American architectural guidebooks.

The Saco meeting house was Johnson's first attempt to design a religious structure in the new

style. A backward glance at the builder's earlier work in New Hampshire reveals the evolution of the building's design and provides insight into the methods by which a New England builder-architect of the early 1800s grappled with new architectural ideas.



Figure 1. Meeting house, Pepperrellborough (Saco), completed 1804. Detail from a lithograph drawn by Charles H. Granger and published by J.H. Bufford, Boston, 1860.



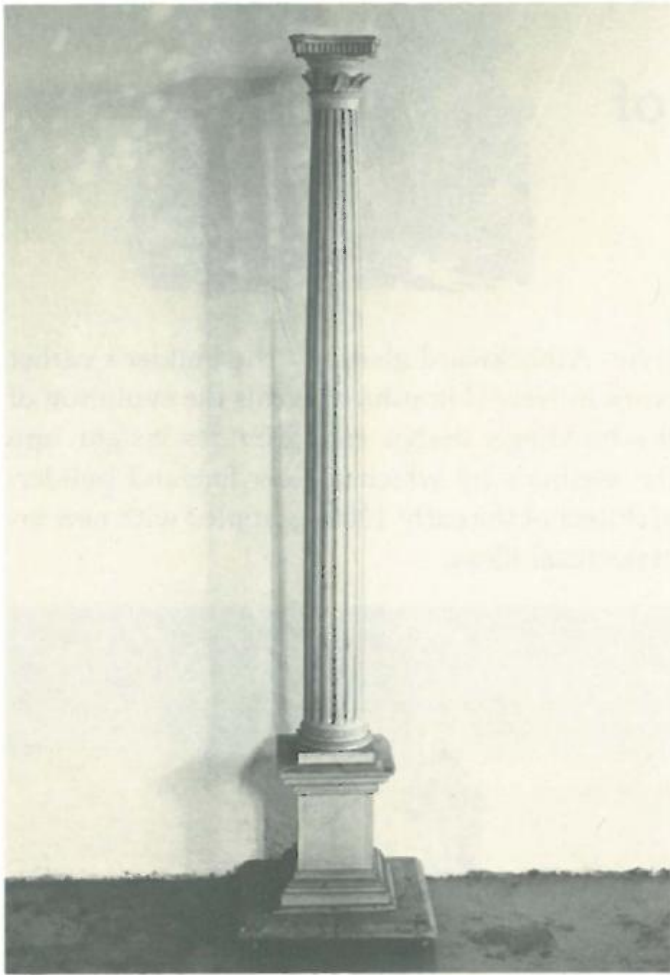


Figure 2. Colonnade from the Pepperellborough meeting house, 1804, possible one of the supports for the pulpit. Courtesy of the York Institute Museum, Saco.

Johnson was a native of the country town of Epping, New Hampshire. After spending his boyhood in newly-settled Sanbornton, where his father was both a joiner and a farmer, Johnson moved to the old tidewater town of Exeter in 1786. Marrying and establishing himself as a joiner, Johnson soon became associated with an older man of remarkable talent and curiosity. Ebenezer Clifford (1746-1821) was a skilled joiner who had finished the hallways of Governor John Langdon's Portsmouth mansion in 1784; an ingenious inventor who developed a diving bell with which he salvaged Revolutionary cannon from the bottom of Penobscot Bay; and a student of architecture who owned several English builder's sourcebooks, including one that may originally have belonged to John Wentworth, New Hampshire's last royal governor.<sup>2</sup> Together, Johnson and Clifford designed several buildings in Exeter.

The most noteworthy of these was the First Parish meeting house of 1798 (Figure 3). This building utilized the traditional meeting house plan, which places the entrance in one of the longer sides of the structure. Yet the Exeter building far outshone the average meeting house, being a structure of monumental scale with an ambitious tower and with detailing adapted from one of Clifford's English books. It was said in Exeter in later years that the Saco meeting house was "copied" from this earlier structure. While this is not literally the case, the Saco building owed much to its New Hampshire predecessor.

In 1800 Johnson was the chief joiner and probably the designer of the market house in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This brick structure introduced several features that would reappear on the Saco meeting house, including three arched doorways and a large Palladian window lighting a second-floor hall. Immediately after completing this job, Johnson moved his family to Saco, probably attracted by the town's booming lumber-based economy.

Within four months of Johnson's arrival in Maine, much of central Portsmouth was devastated by fire. Johnson was immediately commissioned to design a brick fire insurance office at the focal point of the New Hampshire port. Being engaged in building the meeting house in Saco, Johnson remained at work but provided plans for the Portsmouth office. The building he "moddled" for Portsmouth embodied design elements which are strongly evident in the Saco building (Figure 4).

The Saco meeting house, then, can be seen as the product of a five-year evolution in the mind of its builder. The plan of the structure was inspired by the rising popularity in New England of the "church" form. Yet the basic design of the Saco tower harked back to the Exeter steeple, now moved to the end of the building. The central doorway of the Saco church, with its double fanlight, copied a pulpit window that Johnson had used on the Exeter meeting house and reflected as well the doorway of his Portsmouth insurance office. The three-doorway facade of the Saco building followed both the Portsmouth market house of 1800 and the Portsmouth in-



surance office of 1804. The Palladian windows on the first stage of the Saco tower recalled a window on the Portsmouth market house, while the two-story pilasters of the facade related to those of the Portsmouth insurance office.

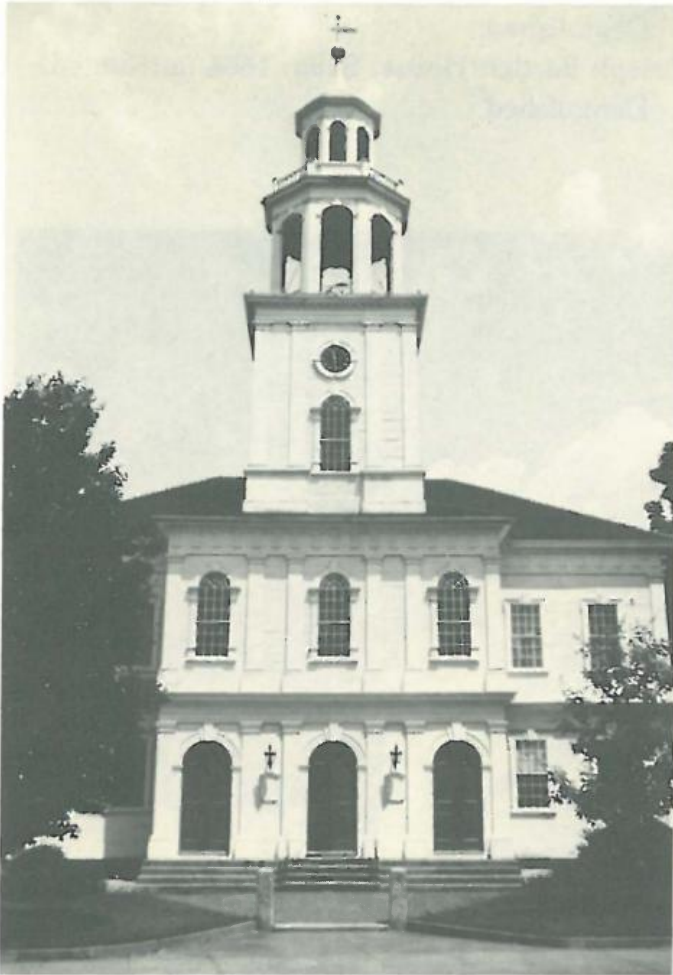


Figure 3. First Parish meeting house, Exeter, New Hampshire, 1798.

Johnson remained a resident of Saco for some twelve years, returning several times to Portsmouth for further work. The architect's other designs in Saco are poorly recorded. Among them was the Capt. Asa Stephens house on the lower Ferry Road. After becoming a popular tavern, this house burned in 1876. Another Johnson design was probably the Joseph Bartlett house, built in 1804 and destroyed about 1872 when the Boston & Maine Railroad was extended through town. Locally known as "Bartlett's Folly," the house had a cross-shaped plan with one arm of the cross being a semicircular bay extending toward the river. The house was further remarkable for its flat roof, covered with the



Figure 4. New Hampshire Fire and Marine Insurance Company Office (center), Portsmouth, New Hampshire. From a stereograph of ca. 1860, courtesy of James B. Vickery.

same type of tar-and-gravel "composition" that Johnson had previously used on his fireproof brick buildings in Portsmouth.

After returning to Portsmouth one final time in 1814, Johnson moved to New York City. He died there in 1819. But the architect left a dual legacy in Saco. Johnson's buildings continued to ornament the town for decades. And his son, John (1789-1875), not to be confused with a Saco inventor of the same name, followed his father's footsteps as a builder and architect. John Johnson's most notable monument was the 1827 Second Parish (Unitarian) Church (Figure 5), a building fully in the new Greek Revival style. As Bradbury Johnson had helped to transform the sawmilling town of Saco with sophisticated designs in the Federal style, so did John Johnson ornament the village, now moving into the textile manufacturing era, with structures befitting the new age.

*James L. Garvin*  
*February, 1984*

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Dwight *Travels in New England and New York*. 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 2:154.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Garvin, "Ebenezer Clifford, Architect and Inventor," *Old-Time New England* 65 (Winter-Spring 1975): 22-37.

List of Known Commissions in Maine  
by Bradbury Johnson:

Meeting House, Pepperrellborough (Saco),  
1803-04, Demolished.

Captain Asa Stephens House, Saco, ?,  
Demolished.

Joseph Bartlett House, Saco, 1804 (attributed),  
Demolished.



Figure 5. Second Parish (Unitarian) Church, Saco, 1827.

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